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ABSTRACT

An instrument for assessing coping style in emotionally disturbed children and adolescents is described, and intervention strategies for use once the coping style has been identified are reviewed. The "Assessment of Coping Style" instrument consists of drawings of persons interacting in various settings through which the subject can express his coping style. Intervention strategies are discussed for some behaviors commonly seen with emotionally disturbed children in the classroom. Among the techniques recommended are removing the opportunities to continue use of the same coping style and teaching alternative, more appropriate coping styles. (SW)

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# THE COPING STYLE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING AND DEALING WITH BEHAVIOR DISORDERS

## II. ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

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Assessment.

An initial analysis or assessment of an individual's Coping Style is essential to planning an intervention program that will help the person learn more appropriate and more acceptable behaviors for dealing with his problems. This requires the identification of the specific Coping Style most commonly used by the person. In the past it has been necessary to depend almost exclusively upon observation to determine it. Trained rehavilitation counselors, clinical and school psychologists, psychiatric social workers, and psychiatrists rarely have the time to make the extensive behavioral observations essential to accurate assessment. In addition, even these observers often make errors in judgment since people commonly disguise the Coping Style they are using very effectively. It is, therefore, essential that an instrument be used to obtain this information so that the diagnosis will be accurate and not influenced by the observer's biases and/or lack of adequate sampling of behavior.

A number of instruments, such as the Rorschach, Thematic Apperception Test, and Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory have been used with adults fairly extensively. They may provide skilled clinical and school psychologists with a great deal of valuable information concerning the subject's personality structure, self-

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concept, direction of feelings, and focus of his problems. With children adaptations of the Thematic Apperception Test and several behavior rating scales or check lists have been used with varying degrees of success. These instruments provide no information, however, concerning the Coping Style the person commonly uses to deal with his problems.

In order to obtain this information the Assessment of Coping Style, an original and unique instrument, was developed. It was initially designed for use by educators exclusively for the identification of the Coping Style being used by children and adolescent youth who were having interpersonal relationship problems with peers and authority and were often classified as emotionally disturbed. It has proved to be a valuable tool for school psychologists, guidance counselors, and teachers working with pupils with behavior disorders. As a result an adult form was recently developed for the use of clinical psychologists, personnel specialists, rehabilitation counselors, penologists, and so forth.

The Assessment of Coping Style consists of 20 drawings of persons in various settings; 10 depicting some type of interaction with authority figures and 10 depicting some type of interaction with peers. Throu gh the use of drawingd the subject's attention is directed away from self to the qualities of the stimulus situation--the picture. The subject's task is to select a response from among the six statements provided that represents the feelings of the designated person in the drawing. In essence, the subject has the opportunity to express

his Coping Style safely by "hiding behind" the figure in the drawing.

Intervention Strategies.

Once the Coping Style being commonly used by the child has been identified, intervention procedures can be instituted. In principle, the strategies used are relatively simple ones although they may not always be that easy to implement. First, remove the opportunities to continue the use of the style of coping the child has focused upon and tends to use regardless of the situation thus forcing him to select alternative styles. Next, teach him to select alternative, more appropriate Coping Styles for specific situations using techniques that are appricable to his developmental level--puppets, discussion, role playing, counselling, etc.

Children who tend to use Externalized Attack behaviors are angry children. They belittle other children, blame others for mistakes, call others derogatory names, cheat, complain, destroy other's property, get others into trouble, kick, bite, lie, make faces, pinch, scream at others, refuse to participate in group activities, slap and hit, swear, threaten, throw things and so forth. The first strategy to use with these children is to structure the environment so that they cannot use these behaviors. Move the child away from the group. Do not permit him to wander around or leave his seat. Remove him from all group activities. Walk with him, apart from the rest of the class, to the cafeteria, library, gymnasium, school bus, art, or music. Restrict the use of supplies and materials and require that he pay for, or reimburse in some fashion, those things he destroys.

The second strategy is to help him select alternative behaviors. Some techniques for accomplishing this are to use reality checks as, "What do you think would happen if....?", reinforcing appropriate behaviors, soliciting the classes cooperation and using peer pressure, and making sure he understands assignments and is able to do them.

Externalized Avoidance is used when the individual is aware that an action is expected but for one reason or another he does not want to perform it and can blame someone else for failing to do so. With an externalized avoider one tends to see such behaviors as frequently breaking pencil points, loss of materials, complaints concerning the difficulty of assignments, crying, apathy, giving excuses, hyperactivity, being off-task, and tattling. He is finding excuses and blaming others or outside events for not doing assigned tasks. Interventions to be considered are providing the child with a ballpoint pen whose tip wont break, distributing only materials to be used immediately so that there is no opportunity to "lose" or "misplace" them, pair an undesirable task with one he wants to perform, make sure the child can perform assigned tasks, seat the child near the teacher, do not permit him to wander, ignore tales, pair the child with a good student, use visual and auditory signaling techniques to attract the child's attention to get him back on-task, and monitor his behavior and work closely. Do not permit the child to use this method coping to get out of assigned work.

Externalized Denial is another withdrawal style of coping except, unlike avoidance, the person is unaware of the requirements he is failing to meet. A child using this Coping Style may fidget

(respond motorically to extraneous stimuli), use such excuses as "No one told me." or "I didn't know.", day dream, and steal (under the impression the object was given to him). Commonly used intervention techniques are making short and highly specific assignments, requiring the child to copy the assignments in an assignment notebook (not just read them from the chalkboard or hear them given orally), touching the child to keep him on-task, monitoring all activities and assignments closely, seating the child next to the teacher, using reality checks as, "Who is really responsible?", have the child use check lists for tasks completed, have assignments written (not just read and studied) so that their completion can be continuously verified, and reinforce on-task behavior.

When children use Internalized Coping Styles they are turning the cause of their problems inward, upon self, rather than blaming their lack of performance on someone or something outside. Internalized Attack behaviors denote, like Externalized Attack ones, an angry child but now he abuses himself. Mild forms of self-abuse consist of making derogatory remarks about ones ability, performance or apprearance, missing activities and refusing to participate in activities he enjoys, and self-pity. More acute behaviors are head banging, pulling out ones hair, scratching oneself until one bleeds, kicking or punching an inanimate object to hurt oneself, and throwing up. Primary interventions to use are those that provide support and help the child to feel he is of value and can perform adequately. Thus, making sure the child can perform assigned tasks, rewarding successes, using diversions from

unpleasant or unsuccessful experiences, assigning teacher or room helping roles are appropriate and essential.

The classroom behaviors of Internalized Avoiders and Deniers are similar to those previously discussed for Externalized Avoiders and Deniers. In general, intervention techniques for Internalizers and Externalizers are also similar with the exception that the Internalizers generally require a great deal more in the way of personal, psychological support.*

The previously briefly described behaviors were selected as being some of the more commonly seen in children and adolescent youth with emotional and/or behavior disorders in the school and classroom. A definitive list would be much more extensive. Each child selects his own specific behavior or repertoire of behaviors based upon his personality, the personalities he has had to deal with, and the successes he has had using them in the past. Similarly, the listed suggested intervention techniques a teacher might use also vary widely and only examples of those that are more commonly applied by numbers of teacher with good success were mentioned. It is in the intervention area the art of teaching and counseling becomes apparent. Thus, each teacher, guidance counselor and psychologist will select the interventions that achieve the desired results for him based upon his personality, the personality of the child with whom he is working and the interaction of their respective personalities.

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*A much more extensive and definitive discussion concerning Coping Styles and intervention techniques can be found in: Boyd, Herbert F, and G. Orville Johnson, Analysis of Coping Style, Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1981. 207 pp.

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